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SUBJECT: THESSALONIKI: MODEST TURNOUT FOR TWO RALLIES IN DEFENSE OF MACEDONIA NAME

REF: THESSALONIKI 0014

¶1. SUMMARY: Two simultaneous rallies took place peacefully in Thessaloniki yesterday to voice support for Greece's position regarding the Macedonia name issue. The rallies were only modestly attended unlike those in previous years which drew massive crowds. Politicians from the major parties avoided the event and media coverage was low key. END SUMMARY

MODEST TURNOUTS AND RESTRAINED MEDIA COVERAGE

¶2. Modest turnouts and restrained media coverage marked the two simultaneous rallies held yesterday in Thessaloniki in support of Greece's position on the Macedonia name issue. The first event, an outside rally at the site of the Alexander the Great statue on Thessaloniki's waterfront, was organized by the "Ion Dragoumis Institute" which has close ties with the far right Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) party led by Giorgos Karatzaferis.

The second was an indoor rally organized by the Macedonia Struggle Committee. Each event drew between 5,000 and 6,000 participants. Television coverage of the events was limited except for that from Karatzaferis' own TV channel which covered the LAOS event in its entirety. Other TV channels included reports on the rallies as part of their news programming but there was equal or greater coverage of labor rallies elsewhere in Greece. Local newspapers carried reports of the rallies prominently but the top story was a visit to Thessaloniki by U.N. negotiator Matthew Nimitz to meet with the Greek negotiator Vasilakis.

THE MACEDONIAN STRUGGLE COMMITTEE RALLY

¶3. The indoor rally organized by the Macedonian Struggle Committee had three speakers: keynote speaker Costas Zouraris, a journalist and professor, Thessaloniki Metropolitan Anthimos and Stelios Papathemelis, former PASOK Minister and current leader of the Democratic Renaissance party. Zourias speech was strident, referring to "an oligarchic four-party system in the pseudo-state of Athens" and to "politicians who are crawling because they are cowards and afraid to become Greeks again." Zouraris' comments resulted in the immediate departure from the rally of Thessaloniki Prefect Panaiotis Psomiadis who was the only high-ranking New Democracy politician to attend the rally. Psomiadis had said earlier in the week that he planned to attend since he felt that the gathering would be "non-political." Metropolitan Anthimos was more restrained in his remarks, focusing on the history of the region to assert that Macedonia is Greek. Democratic Renaissance president Papathemelis called for a referendum on the name issue and called upon the Greek government to freeze financial aid to Macedonia and Greek businesses to stop doing business in the country.

THE LAOS RALLY

14. Party leader Giorgos Karatzeferis was the only speaker at the LAOS rally. He was sharply critical of Prime Minister Karamanlis and Foreign Minister Bakoyiannis (demanding her dismissal) and called both for a referendum and for elections regarding the name issue. He also criticized the position of PASOK leader Giorgos Papandreou. Among his remarks was a statement that "the country will not be fragmented and it will not be sold out to Americans."

15. COMMENT: The limited turnout, relatively calm atmosphere and restrained media coverage of the events reflect a growing sense in northern Greece that a negotiated solution to the Macedonia name issue (along lines proposed by the GoG) is both the most pragmatic and likely future course. Most also expect the GoG will defend its "red lines" in negotiations and veto Macedonia's NATO accession in the absence of an agreed name. Recent comments by Thessaloniki Mayor Papageorgopolis and Prefect Psomiadis (Reftel) calling for negotiations rather than demonstrations confirm that local leaders feel this way and yesterday's rallies suggest that the public feels the same. END COMMENT

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